



# E-Content

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## UNIT 4 POSTCOLONIAL THEORY: SAID, SPIVAK AND BHABHA

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### 4.0 OBJECTIVES

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In this unit, we shall give you some idea of the wide field known as Postcolonial Theory; (in some cases 'colonial discourse analysis'; but the former term is more inclusive). Three key notions will be taken up by us. These are : 'Orientalism' (Said), 'Subalternity' (Spivak) and 'Mimicry' (Bhabha). These three major critics are often taken to be the 'Holy Trinity' of postcolonial theory and limiting ourselves to their work (a significant part of it in any event) is enough to give us a sense of some of the main issues thrown up by the field as a whole.

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### 4.1 INTRODUCTION

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As stated earlier, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida and Jacques Lacan are three French thinkers (they are mostly clubbed under 'poststructuralism') who have exercised a profound influence on almost all that has happened in literary theory in recent times. In the case of postcolonial theory, the man who has exercised the greatest influence on the field is Foucault. Said's work shows his influence in a very marked way. Spivak and Bhabha also draw from him. The more obvious influence on Spivak is that of Derrida and in Bhabha's case the more obvious influence is that of Lacan.

Since power is a major issue in postcolonial theory let us take a look at Foucault's view of power. Simply stated, 'discourse' (to Foucault) is a system of statements within which and by which the world can be known. Discourses are ways of constituting knowledge together with the social practices, forms of subjectivity and power relations that inhere in such knowledge and the relations between them. Power too is a relation and gets exercised within discourses in the ways in which these discourses constitute and govern individual subjects. In *The History of Sexuality, Volume One, An Introduction*, Foucault defines power as:

The multiplicity of force relations imminent in the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their own organization, as the process by which, through ceaseless struggles and confrontations, transforms, strengthens or reverses them; as the support which these force relations find in one another thus forming a chain or a system, or on the contrary, the disjunctions and contradictions which isolate them from one another; and lastly as the

strategies in which they take effect, whose general design or institutional crystallization is embodied in the State apparatus, in the formulation of the law, in the various social hegemonies (p.92).

Postcolonialism involves a studied engagement with the experience of colonialism and its present effects both at the level of ex-colonial societies and of more general global developments thought to be the after-effects of empire.

What was it that gave rise to postcolonialism? Why was it that a study of the cultural dimension of imperialism became important? First, independence movements around the world put an end to colonialism. Yet the residual effects of imperialism continued to affect the cultures of the erstwhile colonies. Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961) is one such intervention in colonial discourse. By the 1980's a substantial body of commonwealth literature had emerged in which writers tried to make sense of the impact of colonialism. There was a greater awareness of the power relations between the West and Third World cultures. All these led to a study and analysis of colonialism and its after-effects.

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## 4.2 THE HOLY TRINITY

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Said's *Orientalism* which appeared in 1978 is a good starting point for us. Said sees Orientalism as a discourse by which European culture was able to manage and even produce the orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically and imaginatively during the post-enlightenment period. Said states:

Taking the eighteenth century as a very roughly defined starting point, Orientalism can be defined as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient – dealing with it by making statements about it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it, in short Orientalism as a western style for dominating, restructuring and having authority over the Orient (p.3).

On page 3 itself, Said acknowledges that he had found it useful to employ Foucault's notion of discourse as described by him in *The Archeology of Knowledge and Discipline and Punish*.

A very important statement which Said makes on page 12 of *Orientalism* is:

Orientalism is not a mere political subject matter or field that is reflected passively by culture, scholarship or institutions, nor is it a large and diffuse collection of texts about the orient nor is it representative and expressive of a nefarious 'Western' imperialist plot to hold down the 'Orient World'. It is rather a distribution of geographical awareness into aesthetic, scholarly, economic, sociological and philosophical text; it is an elaboration not only of a basic geographical distinction but also a whole sense of 'interests' ....

Said's book establishes that stereotypes and general ideology about the orient as 'the other' have helped to produce myths about the laziness, deceit and irrationality of Orientals. By means of the discourse of orientalism, Western cultural institutions are responsible for the creation of those 'others'. The Orientals' very difference from the Occident helps establish that opposition by which Europe's own identity can be established. The knowledge of the Orient created by and embodied within the discourse of Orientalism serves to construct an image of the Orient and the Orientals as subservient and subject to domination by the Occident. The knowledge of 'subject-races' or 'Orientals' makes their management easy and profitable.

Knowledge of the Orient is generated out of strength and such strength-generated knowledge, in turn, 'creates' the Orient, the Oriental and his/her world. In most cases

the Oriental is 'contained' and 'represented' by dominating frameworks and the encoding and comparison of the orient with the West ensures in the long run that oriental culture and perspectives are a deviation and a perversion that justify an inferior status for the latter. The Orient is seen as essentially monolithic with an unchanging history, while the Occident is dynamic with an active history. Not only that, the Orient and the Oriental are seen to be passive, non-participatory 'objects' of study. The Orient, in that sense, was sought to be established as a textual construct. On page 36 of his book Said states:

Knowledge gives power, more power requires more knowledge, and so on in an increasingly profitable dialectic of information and control.

The whole thing thus becomes an on-going project.

These then are the essentials of Said's formulations about 'Orientalism'. Let us now move to the essentials of Gayatri Spivak's notion of 'subalternity'. Spivak is a leading contemporary feminist deconstructionist who pays careful attention to issues of gender and race. Her use of the term 'subaltern' is influenced by the Italian thinker Antonio Gramsci. Gramsci consistently referred to a subordinate position in terms of class, gender, race and culture. Spivak's essay 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' addressed the way the 'subaltern' woman is constructed, as absent or silent or not listened to. The 'muteness' of women in postcolonial societies is the main issue which her work confronts. The main argument of her essay is that, between patriarchy and imperialism, subject constitution and object formation, the figure of woman disappears not into a pristine nothingness, but into a marginal position between tradition and modernization.

Spivak uses the term 'subaltern' (of lower rank) for women, blacks, the colonized and the working class. Subalternity comes to suggest the repressive dominance of white Western thinking and an allegory of the displacement of the gendered and colonized (i.e. subaltern) subject, by the imposition of narratives of internationalism and nationalism. The violence inflicted by Western forms of thought upon the East is of great concern to Spivak. She takes 'the third world' to be a creation of the west that locks non-western cultures into an imperial representation. 'Worlding' is the name she gives to the process through which 'colonized space' is 'brought into the world; that is made to exist as part of a world essentially constituted by Eurocentrism.

In these kinds of formulations one of the possible pitfalls is attributing an absolute power to the hegemonic discourse in creating the native and not making enough room for the resistance of the native. That brings us to Bhabha, the third figure in 'the Holy Trinity' and to his key notion that is 'mimicry'.

'Mimicry' designates a gap between the norm of civility as presented by European Enlightenment and its distorted colonial imitation. It serves as the sly weapon of anti-colonial civility and is an ambivalent mixture of deference and disobedience. To Bhabha the operations of the unconscious in the imperial context are far from simple because desire for, as well as fear of, 'the other', does not allow the identities of the colonizer and the colonized to stay fixed and unitary. Colonial power undermines its own authority and can paradoxically provide the means for native resistance. The site of resistance, the strategic reversal of the process of domination that looks the colonial power squarely in the eye, is marked by 'hybridity', an 'in-between' space. It not only displaces the history that creates it, but sets up new structures of authority and generates new political initiatives. It undermines authority because it imitates it only outwardly.

On account of the difficulty of categorizing different cultures into universalist frameworks, Bhabha finds the idea of the 'nation' a little problematic. He thinks that the idea stems from the imposition of a rather arbitrary 'national' character upon a necessarily very heterogeneous collection of people(s).

### 4.3 SAID ON HEART OF DARKNESS

The thrust of Said's 1966 book *Joseph Conrad and the Fiction of Autobiography* is somewhat different from his comments on Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993). On page 25 of the latter book, Said states:

This narrative .... is connected directly with the redemptive force, as well as the waste and horror of Europe's mission in the dark world. Whatever is lost or elided or simply made up in Marlow's immensely compelling recitation is compensated for in the narrative's sheer historical momentum, the temporal forward movement.

To Said, the imperialist politics and aesthetics which *Heart of Darkness* embodies was in the closing years of the nineteenth century an aesthetics, politics and epistemology which were almost unavoidable and inevitable. The strength of Said's reading in this case is in his balancing of the aesthetic and the political. That is something which one cannot say about the reaction of someone like Chinua Achebe who saw *Heart of Darkness* as 'out and out' a racist book.

In the same vein Rudyard Kipling's *Kim* (which does not figure in your course) is seen by Said as a great document of its aesthetic moment, the realization of a great and cumulative process, which, in the closing years of the nineteenth century, is reaching its last major moment before India's independence; on the one hand, surveillance and control over India: on the other, love for and fascinated attention to its every detail (*Culture and Imperialism*, p.195)

These kinds of readings are more open than those which merely refute, challenge and oppose. Most 'high modernist' texts deserve and demand a reading of that kind in view of their complexity and of the irony that mostly goes into their making.

The general characteristic of reading in postcolonial criticism is that a text is 'read back' from the perspective of the colonized. Such reading characteristically rejects the claims to universalism made on behalf of canonical Western literature and seeks to show its limitations of outlook especially its general inability to empathize across boundaries of cultural and ethnic difference.

### 4.5 THE IMPORTANCE OF POSTCOLONIALISM

'Orientalism', 'subalternity' and 'mimicry' are important aspects of the work of the three critics. One of the problems that *Orientalism* (the book) suffers from is (that it assumes) too readily that an unequivocal intention on the part of the West was always realized through its discursive productions. The other two critics do not seem to give enough direct power and role to 'agency' on behalf of the colonized people. Also, Bhabha's style is so involved that an oppositional stance does not come through and is obscured by the meanderings of language.

And yet the cumulative achievement of the three critics discussed in this unit has been really admirable. There is all around us a new cultural politics of difference with all its inner complexities and subtle nuances. One of the challenges for postcolonial theory today is to come to terms with specific local conditions and with comparison that can be discerned in and between them. There is also the daunting task of trying to know the story of colonial and neo-colonial engagements in all their complexity. Finding a proper language and terminology for representing those engagements is another major challenge. The three critics taken up here have done more than most

others in indicating some of the directions that can be fruitfully followed, sometimes aided by poststructuralism and postmodernism.

Some more general charges, however, remain. Aijaz Ahmad an Indian critic objects that postcolonial theorists 'live and do their theories' in First World countries and that (in Ahmad's view) affects the impact of their work. Arif Dirlik sees the postcolonial intellectual as complicitous in feeding into the goals of the capitalist frame of postcolonial theory. Kwame Appiah argues that the 'post' of postcolonial theory and postmodernism are spaces created by capitalism to market cultural products in the developing world.

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## 4.6 LET US SUM UP

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Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak and Homi Bhabha are said to be 'the Holy Trinity' of postcolonial theory. Having said that, it becomes important to point out that their work cannot be clubbed together in any homogeneous way. Each of them is different and important for the contributions s/he has made to the field. Said's main contribution to the field is the concept of 'orientalism' — the attempt on the part of the West to establish the East as lazy, deceitful and irrational. Spivak answers the question 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' with a 'No'. Women are 'doubly effaced' in Spivak's scheme of things. Bhabha's theorizing about 'mimicry' builds on the potential for irreverence and mockery in the colonizer/colonized relationship. All three critics are influenced by Foucault's views on power and discourse. Additionally, Spivak is influenced by Derrida and Bhabha by Lacan. All three draw on other resources as well.

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## 4.7 QUESTIONS

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1. What is the main argument of Edward Said's book *Orientalism*?
2. How have Foucault's view on discourse and power influenced Said's *Orientalism*?
3. What does Spivak mean by 'subalternity'? What distresses her about the condition of women in colonial societies?
4. What does Bhabha mean by 'mimicry' in the colonial context?

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## 4.8 SUGGESTED READINGS

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Edward Said, *Orientalism*. London: Routledge, 1978.

*Culture and Imperialism*. London: Chatto and Windus, 1993.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in Gary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (eds.) *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. London: Macmillan, 1998.

Homi Bhabha *The Location of Culture*, London: Routledge, 1994.

Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffins (eds) *The Empire Writes Back*. London: Routledge, 1989.

Robert Young, *White Mythologies*, London: Routledge, 1990.

## 4.8 KEY WORDS

**hegemony:**

In the work of the Italian Marxist thinker Gramsci, the word is used to account for the way in which a ruling class maintains itself in power.

**subaltern:**

of lower rank.

**mimicry:**

The fact that the colonizer in his/her relationship with the colonized is always vulnerable to the irreverence and mockery beneath the seeming servility of the colonised.